

## Henry Corbin and the Imaginal: A Look at the Concept and Function of the Creative Imagination in Iranian Philosophy

Ali Shariat

*Diogenes* 1991 39: 83

DOI: 10.1177/039219219103915605

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://dio.sagepub.com/content/39/156/83.citation>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

[International Council for Philosophy and Human Studiess](#)

**Additional services and information for *Diogenes* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://dio.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://dio.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Dec 1, 1991

[What is This?](#)

# Henry Corbin and the Imaginal: A Look at the Concept and Function of the Creative Imagination in Iranian Philosophy

*Ali Shariat*

The phenomenological term “imaginal” was coined and introduced into the French language by Henry Corbin (1903–1978). Throughout his work, Corbin used the “imaginal” as his fundamental concept, as the very foundation of a *Weltanschauung*. Etymologically, this new term was derived from the Latin phrase *mundus imaginalis*. As for its meaning, it is synonymous with several Persian and Arabic technical terms, such as *alam al-mithal* (the world of images, archetypical ideas), *malakut* (the subtle world of the souls), *barzakh* (interworld), *hurqalya* (the world of the celestial Earth, of celestial corporeality), *na-koja-abad* (the land of nowhere). These technical terms taken from theosophical literature have a meaning very close to that of the term “imaginal.” They translate contemplative experience arising from the theophanic imagination or agent imagination (*imaginatio vera*). From the point of view of location, they designate the qualitative space of this imagination (*mundus imaginalis*).

In suggesting the words “imaginal,” “imaginal world,” and “interworld,” Corbin thematized and conceptualized, in French and in an unprecedented way, “a precise order of reality, corresponding to a precise mode of perception.”<sup>1</sup> By “precise order of reality,” he meant the imaginal order, that is, a world created by and through the creative imagination, and of which it is itself the organ of perception. As spiritual topography, this imaginative world *really* exists “outside the exterior location” and independently from our fictions.<sup>2</sup> And a “precise mode of perception” means, in Corbinian terminology, that there is an “imaginative perception,”

thanks to which suprasensory realities – the forms and figures of the *mundus imaginalis* – present themselves to the imaginative or contemplative conscience.

There were essentially three reasons why Corbin used the term *imaginal*. First, he sought to differentiate it from the word “imaginary,” which, according to him, was the equivalent of “signifying the unreal, something which remained outside of being and existence, in short utopian.”<sup>3</sup> Second, he was anxious to depict in terms of space the representative field of the creative imagination as it appeared in Iranian theosophy. Third, he sought to stress the specific noetic or cognitive function of this imaginative “order,” a function that showed itself to be both spiritualizing and creative. In this sense, the *imaginal* refers to an “organ of perception” whose object is an *imago terrae*, a subtle topography. It is an interworld, or “eighth climate,” situated beyond the “seven climates” of the phenomenal world, between the perceptible and the intelligible. Thus, it can be located only in a sacred cartography. The subtle organ that perceives this “psychospiritual” reality is, according to Corbin, the “imaginative conscience” or the “cognitive imagination.”<sup>4</sup>

In Corbin’s ideas, a eulogy of the Iranian *imaginal* exists alongside a concern for the recovery of the imaginative dimension by contemporary Western thought. This recovery should obliterate the traditional opposition between soul and body, between the immanent and the transcendent, between the perceptible and the imaginative. Corbin remarks in his *Charter of the Imaginal* that “it is precisely the need for this spiritual mediator (of the imaginative faculty, of the *imaginal*) that is rejected by any dualism arising, in one way or other, from Cartesianism or from something closely related to it, in some form or other.”<sup>5</sup>

Corbin is very aware of the general contemporary lassitude with respect to the dominant positivist way of thinking, which, given the overvaluing of “pure reason,” remains deprived of any imaginative foundation, and is at the heart of a technical civilization that rejects what it cannot master or comprehend. Our philosopher is also aware, however, of the inevitable aging of a positivist rationalism that only knows how to conform to the laws and criteria of ordinary and everyday banality. In the social space where rationalism remains inseparable from a unidimensional way of life, deprived of any imaginative depth, Corbin notices the ontological impoverishment of the imaginative faculty among individuals, as well as its repercussions on collective life. He reconsiders the imaginative dimension, this living aspect of human reality transformed

into "the lunatic of the home," and wishes it to be reinstated, at least in philosophical speculation.

The word *imaginal*, while it translates the imaginative dimension of Iranian contemplative thought from Sohrawardi to the present, equally evokes the *mundus imaginalis* of Western theosophy from Paracelsus and Jacob Boehme to Schelling. This is the reason why the very concept of the *imaginal* in Corbin becomes creative. In addition to the vast horizon that it opens up to philosophical speculation, it gives our author an unprecedented opportunity to bring together the "Persian Platonists" and the "Cambridge Platonists." From this arises the possibility of a dialogue between Eastern and Western gnostic philosophers.

## I. The Imaginal: Its Conceptual Field, Noetic Function, and Initiatory Range

### 1. Definition and Ontological Status

Iranian theosophers usually distinguish four or five "worlds" subject to an ontological hierarchy. This cosmological plurality symbolizes the different levels of the universe of being. The hierarchy of worlds is as follows: 1) the "world of divine reality" or "world of secrets" (*lahut*, 'alam al-asrar); 2) the "world of the luminaries or pure intelligences" ('alam al-anwar, *jabarut*); 3) the "world of spirits" ('alam al-arwah) or higher *malakut* (spiritual world); 4) the "imaginal interworld of ideas" ('alam al-mithal) or lower *malakut*; and 5) the "world of material bodies and perceptible phenomena," or nature (*molk*, *nasus*).

At the esoteric level, the sequence of these universes reproduces the hierarchy of the "mystical stations" (*maqamat*) and, from the theosophical point of view, the universes relate to the hypostases, to the gradual theophanic manifestations, to the levels of the unrevealed (*lahut*), of intelligence ('aql), spirit (*ruh*), soul (*nafs*), and nature (*tabi'at*).<sup>6</sup>

For theosophical mystics like Shabestari (twelfth century), the human being is the "microcosm" ('alam-e aspar) in which the "macrocosm" ('alam-e akbar) deploys itself. Thus, it contains virtually all of the universes.<sup>7</sup> The perception of these "worlds" by the gnostic presupposes within him an "interior metamorphosis" that, by liberating his "psychospiritual organs,"<sup>8</sup> gives him access to universes situated in *other* times and space.

In this way, the imaginal is defined as the interworld of images – ideas ontologically situated between the “perceptible world” and the “purely intelligible world.” Sohrawardi Shaykh al-Ishraq (1155-1191), the “master founder of Oriental theosophy,” was the initiator of an ontology of the imaginal interworld that he called *hurqalya*, at the hiatus between the intelligible and the perceptible. His ontology was nourished by a vast knowledge of the Mazdean angelological cosmology and the theosophy of the Khosrowaniyun, the sages of ancient Persia who were “precursors of the philosophy of light.” That is why the restoration or “resurrection of the wisdom of ancient Persia” was realized with Sohrawardi,<sup>9</sup> whereas the master founder of Oriental theosophy (Hikmat al-Ishraq),<sup>10</sup> established the initiatory chain of the Ishraqiyun, of the “Oriental philosophers.” Thus, Khosrowaniyun and Ishraqiyun guaranteed the homogeneity and continuity of an intermediary world, clarified by the ohrmazdean luminaries and revived by spiritual Islam.

When you learn from the treatises of ancient sages that a world exists that has no dimensions or extent . . . , do not hasten to cry out that this is a lie. . . . If you arrive at our book of Oriental theosophy, without doubt you will have understood something of what had gone before, providing that your initiator guides you. If not, have faith in wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

For Sohrawardi, there thus existed an interworld already known by the Khosrowaniyun. One can arrive at this world thanks to initiatory pedagogy, or by way of salvatory wisdom.

For the celebrated Iranian theosopher Molla Sadra of Shiraz (seventeenth century), influenced by the teaching of Sohrawardi and author of the *Book of Four Spiritual Voyages* (*Kitab al-Asfar al-Arba'a al-aqliya*), all the schemas of the universe can be reduced to one fundamental schema, which distinguishes a triple universe: the perceptible physical world, the suprasensory world of the soul – or interworld, and the world of pure intelligences. Three organs of knowledge correspond to these universes: the senses, the imaginations, and the intellect. This triad corresponds to the anthropological body-soul-spirit triad that governs the triple growth of man from the present world to other worlds.<sup>12</sup> Molla Sadra confers an immaterial and transcendent nature on the imaginative faculty and on the objects that it perceives. From the spiritualization of the imaginal, he succeeds in drawing conclusions of an eschatological type: The perceptible body will continue to exist in other worlds,

but in a subtle, immaterial, spiritual form.<sup>13</sup> "Man has a substantial 'imaginal existence' (*wojud mithali*), continuing to exist in and of itself in the world of images 'in suspense' (that is, not immanent within a substratum). In the same way, there is a substantial intelligible archetype (*mithal 'aqli*), existing in and of itself, in the world of intelligences. It is the same for each physically existing entity between physically existing entities. This entity has a triple existence: 1) intelligible (*'aqli*), 2) imaginal (*mithali*), and 3) material (*maddi*)."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, for Molla Sadra, the interworld is a "perceptible, immaterial, spiritual, second world." It is the subtle location of imaginative forms that guarantee the future and the act of *existing* and the superexistence and individuation of human spiritual entities *post mortem*.

The median and mediatory situation of the imaginal interworld leads us to make a distinction between the function of this world and that of the imaginative forms that dwell in it. On the one hand, this function consists of "imaginalizing," that is, corporalizing, the intelligible forms to which it gives shape and dimension and, on the other hand, of "dematerializing" perceptible forms. According to the Persian theosopher Fayz Kashani (seventeenth century), "spirits are embodied and bodies are spiritualized," because "it is in this world that ways of being and moral behavior are personalized and suprasensory realities manifest themselves in forms and shapes which they symbolize."<sup>15</sup>

As a result of this ambivalent function, the interworld has two dimensions; in each of them, it integrates with the adjacent world. Through this participation in the essence of the two worlds that it mediates, the imaginal changes the perceptions of the senses, and all that is contained within their proper field, into symbols. Consequently, these symbolic image-ideas fall solely under powerful imaginative perception.

Drawing on Iranian-Islamic theosophical sources, Corbin arrives at the conclusion that the median situation of the imaginal "imposes an original discipline on imaginative power and distinguishes it from the imaginary, from the unreal."<sup>16</sup> For him, the imaginal is "the world of vision (those of a Swedenborg) and of resurrections, where all flesh is *caro spiritualis* . . . an imaginal body (*jism mithali*) is not an imaginary body. A subtle body is not an unreal body. The body is not the antagonist or the antithesis of the spirit. The body can exist at the level of the perceptible world, at the imaginal level,

at the intelligible, spiritual level, and there is even, at the limit, a divine body."<sup>17</sup>

## 2. The Imaginal Is the "Land of Nowhere" (Na-Koja-Abad)

Corbin pays special attention to the Persian term *na-koja-abad*, coined by Sohrawardi, the literal meaning of which is "the land [*abad*] of nowhere [*na-koja*]." To avoid being contradictory, Corbin refused to translate this term as *ou-topia*, a word that is not found in Greek dictionaries, but was invented by Thomas More (1478–1535), the author of *Utopia*. It designates the complete absence of any specific locality.<sup>18</sup> In conformity with the idea contained within the Persian term *na-koja-abad*, Corbin's interpretation was that this term did not designate anything like a being without extent, in a punctiform state. He stated that "the word *abad* designates a city, a cultivated and inhabited country, and thus an entity extended in space. It is necessary to begin by surmounting the old dualism between the spiritual and that which is 'extended.'"<sup>19</sup> Referring to the theosophical tradition according to which *na-koja-abad* is situated beyond the cosmic mountain of *qaf* and contains the imaginal world of *hurqalya* and the mystical cities of Jabalqa and Jabarsa that are situated there, Corbin suggests: "*Na-Koja-Abad* begins at the moment when one 'leaves' the sphere that defines all possible orientations in this world, that which carries the cardinal celestial points ideally inscribed on it. . . . Once this limit is crossed, the question "where?" (*ubi? koja?*) loses its meaning, at least the meaning that it properly has in space as we all experience it." *Na-koja-abad* is the "place that is not contained within a place, in a *topos*, allowing a response to the question 'where?'"<sup>20</sup>

In a more recent text, Corbin takes up the same idea: "Certainly nowhere is, so to speak, beyond physical place, a place where visionary events and voyages take place." Here, he sees a similarity between "the land of nowhere" and the *Imago Mundi* of Ptolemy.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the voyage toward and within "no place" signifies an initiatory quest for the hidden self undertaken in the imaginal world. This quest "is precisely to step over the limit beyond which the pilgrim, in place of finding himself *in the place*, from then on *is himself the place*. To leave this world . . . is no longer to be in the world, it is to have from then on the world in oneself, to be oneself the location of the world, and it is this that is *imaginal space*; the space where the active imagination freely deploys its vision and its epics."<sup>22</sup> Thus,

"no place" is one with the qualitative space of the mystical imagination and this "space," in its turn, is one with the being of the imagining subject itself. "To be one's proper place without being in the place, that is to be the center and the circumference at the same time." Corbin reminds us of the Sohrawardian verse of the "Story of the Purple Archangel." The angel declares to the visionary who comes to meet him: "However far and however long you go, you will arrive again at the point from which you departed." Because this is "to be in the totality of the sphere of your heaven."<sup>23</sup>

Finally, Corbin concludes here: "*Na-Koja-Abad* is a real country, a real space. . . . It is also the "meeting place of the two seas" (Koran: 18/60): the sea of the senses and the sea of the intellect. It is "*alam al-mithal* that I had to translate by the Latin word *mundus imaginalis* so that *imaginal* reality would not be confused with the unreality of the imaginary." With respect to the mystical quest for the "no place" that Sohrawardi had taught him, Corbin concluded: "It does not refer to local movement, *in corpore*, of the transfer of a physical body from one place to another. . . . The relationship under discussion is, in essence, that of the exterior, of the visible (*ta exo, zahir*), with the interior, the invisible, the esoteric (*ta eso, batin*). To set out from "where?," from the category *ubi*, is to leave external appearances that envelope the hidden inner realities that are concealed like a kernel. For the outsider, the gnostic, it is to return home."<sup>24</sup>

### 3. The Imaginal Is an Imago Terrae: Eran Vej

The "no place" of the imaginal is not a space situated according to the coordinates of positivist geography; but it is a situated space, a visionary "psychogeography" that is perceived in conformity with the "celestial pole" like the *Imago Terrae*, like the primordial image of an earthly paradise. Thus, this qualitative space is beyond the range of positivist perception. It only falls into the sphere of imaginative perception. The Eran Vej, the "original Iranian land," is one of the imaginative configurations of the imaginal. It is situated in the "southern region," that is, the "blessed region," on the path of the sun according to the description in the *avesta*.<sup>25</sup> It is the "polar center," the cosmic extreme north, illuminated by infinite lights.

Which are the lights, o Saint Ahuri Mazda (divinity, supreme sage), which shine in the Var (the dwelling of the primordial Man Yima). . . .



The lights are made from themselves and the lights are made in the world. The only thing that is missing there is the sight of the stars, the moon and the sun. . . .<sup>26</sup>

The Eran Vej is the world of infinite lights where the darkness of the perceptible world comes to an end. Numerous heroes and ecstatic sovereigns of ancient Persia had the vision of Eran Vej, like Kay Khosros, the mystical sovereign of the seven *Keshvars*, of the seven parts of the Earth, who chose to renounce his crown in order to retire into a mountain valley, near the "source of life," where he joined the immortals. At the end of his spiritual combat, the chivalrous soul of the sovereign achieved the height of "protective light" (*Xvarnah*). From then on, he was placed beside the immortal knights who lived in the fortress of Kang Dej, in the stronghold of the Iranian grail, at the summit of the cosmic mountain. The *avesta* says the Kang Dej is situated "on the highest of the heights, on the Haraithi Bareza (Alborz) . . . [which] stands on a thousand columns," on a height "illuminated within by its own power, decorated with stars on the exterior."<sup>27</sup> Thus, the stronghold of Kang Dej represents the polar center of visionary psychogeography, the imaginative location of spiritual combat and the summit of illuminative knowledge.

According to Corbin, the Mazdean imaginal, with all the sacred mountains and strongholds that it contains, is the "eighth climate" of the sacred cartography of ancient Iran. This cartography is arranged according to the system of the seven *Keshvars* or "climates."<sup>28</sup> There is the central *Keshvar*, the "inhabited land," the extent of which is equal to that of all the six other *Keshvars* (or "climates") that are placed around it. There is an eastern *Keshvar*, a western *Keshvar*, two northern *Keshvars*, and two southern ones. All these *Keshvars* are separated from one another by the cosmic ocean that surrounds them. This system of *Keshvars* does not have any spatial coordinates. It is free of all attachments. As for their location, it is deduced astronomically in relation to the central *Keshvar*, the presence of which is situative in space, before itself being situated in space. Thus, it conforms to the typical structure of a qualitative space. In its turn, the central inhabited *Keshvar* is divided into seven "climates," which, in this case, are tangents of each other and equal in radius. Eran Vej is located at the center. The spatial structure is constructed from this center-origin – a center that is not situated in space but that is itself situative of all space. With respect to the system of the seven *Keshvars*, Eran Vej is the "eighth climate," a

*medio mundi* that is situated in the extreme North, at the boundary of the suprasensory.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout his work, Corbin devoted numerous passages to describing imaginal space perceived as a projective geometry of the soul, as a spatializing power. According to him, the imaginal in the form of the *Imago tTrrae* of Eran Vej is an essentially spiritual phenomenon. It can be situated only in relation to a being of light. A "localization" of this kind relates to a "visionary geography," to a "psychogeography," at the center of which is situated the "pole of orientation," the celestial pole that is the threshold of the beyond, the threshold beyond which commences another world, that of physical space. Eran Vej, or the East of Lights, is the "polar center" of "visionary psychogeography." To cross the polar threshold is to orientate oneself toward the "Light of the East," toward a "dimension beyond" that represents the "celestial pole at the axis of human existence."<sup>30</sup>

The celestial pole (or the Earth) is an imaginal form that is perceived by the active imagination. It is the imaginative power that transmutes into symbols, into *Imago Terrae*, an "original Earth" that, from then on, becomes the center of the soul and is united with the "spiritual events of which the soul is itself the scene."<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. The Imaginal and Oriental Knowledge

From the orientation toward Eran Vej began a specific mode of being and knowing. In order to explain this inner transformation, Corbin passed from the mythical epic to the mystical narrative. In the mystical narratives of Sufi, visionaries like Avicenna and Sohrawardi, he found the illustration of the original mode of existence and knowledge. The visionary narrative is thus considered to be an account of the voyage of the soul in the *mundus imaginalis*.

The Corbinian imaginalization of the initiatory narrative is actually in conformity with the Avicennan and Sohrawardian projects of the "Quest for the Orient" (*istishraq*). The Quest for the Orient is, at one and the same time, the quest for "Oriental knowledge" (*'ilm ishraqi*) and the quest for existential integrity. This specific double mode of "Oriental being" (*ishraqi*) and knowing remains inseparable because "Oriental knowledge" implies the reknowing in oneself of the Orient of the luminaries, at a higher degree of intensity and luminescence. According to Sohrawardi, this luminous presence rising onto an inner Orient turned "Oriental knowledge" into

"present knowledge" (*'ilm hozuri*) – a "present understanding" that emerges from a specifically "Oriental" relationship with all that is known, a creative relationship that is, according to Corbin, "the initial foundation of being and knowing."<sup>32</sup> He goes on to state that this knowledge "is thus illuminating because it is Oriental, and Oriental because it is illuminating."<sup>33</sup>

The Quest for the Orient assumes the existence, in the mystic, of an existential type of exile (*ghorbat*). This exile is the counterpart of the Orient-origin, of the north pole of the kingdom of being. The "exile" (*gharib*) is one who is disorientated by the fact that he has lost his "polar dimension" (the Arabic-Persian word *ghorbat* signifies both "disorientation" or straying of the Orient, and "exile"; following from this, the adjectival noun *gharib* signifies "abroad" as well as "an existence outside the Orient"). The Sufi is aware of the existence of an inner exile of this kind. He seeks to go beyond it through experiencing the Way.

Already, the active imagination of the gnostic mystic becomes the organ by which existential depths are perceived, as well as a means for the initiatory quest. In addition to creating mystical poetry and theosophical speculations, it gives birth to numerous visionary accounts (*hikayat*) of a spiritual adventure that unfolds between an imaginary Orient and Occident – two subtle continents that shape the very limits of the Quest – the country of origin and exile.

### 5. The Avicennan and Sohrawardian Narratives

In a theosophical narrative, Avicenna tells the story of the voyage of the soul in the interworld. The hero of the story is Hayy ibn Yaqzan, whose name means "Lookout, living son of the vigilant one." He embodies the itinerant soul, initiated into the Quest for the Orient. His destiny is that of guardian angel and initiator. "[M]y homeland is the heavenly Jerusalem. . . . My profession is always to travel: to journey around the universe to the point of knowing all conditions. My face is turned towards my Father and my Father is vigilant."<sup>34</sup> In this narrative, the joining up of like with like is achieved in the interworld. An initiatory preparation is required in order to enter into this "world." Avicenna tells us: "No one can reach it or force their way into it apart from the Elect from among the masses, those who have acquired a power that did not belong naturally to man in the beginning."<sup>35</sup>

Sohrawardi's "Story of the Oriental Exile" and the "Story of the Purple Archangel" tend in the same direction. In the first, the history of the Oriental pilgrim begins with a fall into captivity. During a "night of the full moon," the Exile escapes, arrives at the limit of the darkness and finally reaches the mystical Sinai. From there, he ascends the "Great Emerald rock," and, near the "Source of Life," meets the Angel (or the Father), the celestial Me: "[A]nd here I saw our Father, in the fashion of a Great Sage, so great that the Heavens and the Earth were near to melting under the epiphany of his light."<sup>36</sup>

The "Story of the Purple Archangel" (*Hikayat-e 'Aql-e sorkh*) is another illustration of the voyage of the soul and of self-knowledge. The Angel tells the disciple: "I am the first being. Formerly I was completely luminous. It was in captivity that I became purple."<sup>37</sup> Through the contrast of his colors, the Angel teaches the mystical visionary about existential dualness, the lifting up of the spirit and the fall into the depths of a solitary, alienated "I," complete awareness and tragic ignorance. The Angel teaches him how to recognize the stages of the tumultuous adventure of self-knowledge and reknowledge of the other. He also teaches him how to cross the valleys of "I" (ego-ness), of "You" (you-ness), and of "He" (he-ness) to arrive finally at the "eighth climate," the illuminated summit of being and knowing. For Sohrawardi, it is in the *na-koja-abad*, in the "land of nowhere," that the ontological emancipation of the Exile and self-knowledge are achieved. The vision of the imaginal interworld thus entails a decisive change. This is what the Sage, an inhabitant of the interworld, affirms: "If you come to see us, it is not that a change has occurred in us; it is in you that the change has taken place."<sup>38</sup>

In this way, the initiatory instruction, according to Sohrawardi, consists, like that of Avicenna, in freeing the solitary "I" of the itinerant exile from its existential confinement and leading it back to its original Orient, to fullness of being. The Angel, the Sage, the Guide, or the Father who governs the imaginative space of the story – or of the imaginal – are diverse manifestations of one and the same alter ego that is, however, the authentic shape of the profound "I," of the self. Existential integrity emerges from the reunion of the apparent "I" (the solitary "I") and the substantial "I" (the hidden self, the alter ego). Without an acknowledgment of the hidden depths, gnostic knowledge remains unattainable. For, according to Sohrawardi, the gnostic's realization of this "consists

first in enquiring about knowledge itself in order, subsequently, to rise to the knowledge that is beyond itself."<sup>39</sup>

The spiritual enterprise of ontological emancipation and gnostic knowledge thus constitutes an initiatory trial undergone by the creative imagination, by the imaginal. As for itself, this imagination is exercised sometimes as the qualitative space of the initiatory quest, sometimes as the organ or imaginative perception, and sometimes as the imaginative faculty, producing symbolic forms and images that are the theatre of the ambivalent events that occur in the most profound depths of the human soul. The mystical narrative, an expression of the quest by means of language, encompasses the triple topical, cognitive, and creative shape of the imagination.

#### 6. *The Imaginal and the "Science of the Imagination"*

There is, in effect, a relationship of identity between the imaginative faculty or active imagination and the bidimensional struggle of the interworld. Like the symbolic shapes that it produces, the creative imagination organizes and deploys itself in the image of this "world," polarized between the perceptible and the suprasensory. It was in this way that the theosophical mystics of Islam distinguished between the two aspects of the imagination, the cosmological – or theophanic – aspect, and the psychological aspect. More precisely, it is a question of two kinds of imagination – the "disjunctive" or autonomous (*khayal-e monfasel*) imagination, and the "conjunctive" or immanent (*khayal-e mottasel*) imagination.<sup>40</sup> The former, separated from the imagining subject, designates the forms and shapes of the interworld. The latter, which is contiguous with the subject, represents the imaginative function itself in its cognitive and creative aspects. However, this immanent form of the imagination is separated from the imaginary and from the conjectural or estimative (*wahm*) faculty. These two aspects, disjunctive and conjunctive, constitute the psychocosmological function of the human imagination.

The theophanic (or disjunctive) aspect is the theophany (*tajalli*) of divine names, through which divine reality is revealed to the imaginative awareness of the mystic. In this sense, the theophanic imagination, exactly like prayer, is creative: every time it is used, it recreates the divine presence in the heart of the believer. In his interpretation of the celebrated Ibn Arabi, Corbin states:

The creative imagination is the theophanic imagination and the creator is conjoined with the imagining creature because every creative imagination is a theophany, a recurrence of creation.<sup>41</sup>

In order to explain and justify the theophanic nature of the creative imagination, Corbin takes up Ibn Arabi in affirming:

In essence, creation is a theophany. In this way, creation is an act of divine imaginative power. This creative divine imagination is, in essence, the theophanic imagination. In its turn, the active imagination of the gnostic is equally a theophanic imagination. The beings that it "creates" have an independent existence, *sui generis*, in its own intermediary world. Far from being something unreal arising from our fantasies, the God that it "creates" is also a theophany, because the active imagination of the human being is nothing other than an organ of absolute theophanic imagination [*takhayyol motlaq*] . . .<sup>42</sup>

In this way, creation is an epiphany [*tajalli*], that is to say a passage from the occult state, the state of power, to the luminous, manifested, revealed state. In this way, it is an act of the primordial divine imagination.<sup>43</sup>

Among Iranian theosophers, this cosmogony of divine names or attributes takes on a specifically Shi'ite form. Thus, for Damawandi (eighteenth century), for example, the divine name is no longer a concept, a "conceptual principle" (*mafhum*), but a "living being" (*mawjud*), that is, a hypostasis. The divine names with a cosmological function are the very names of the fourteen beings of light making up the Mohammedan *Plérôme* (Mohammed, his daughter Fatima, and the twelve Shi'ite Imams). Damawandi justifies his prophetological and imamological conception of the divine names through certain declarations like that attributed to the first Imam, 'Ali: "I am the supreme, divine Name," and the other to the Imams descended from him: "We are the most beautiful names of God."<sup>44</sup>

Along the same lines, Fayz Kashani affirms that "the bodies of the Imams are nothing other than subtle bodies (*ajsad mithaliya*),"<sup>45</sup> that is, forms, or corporeal-imaginal entities. This identification of the divine names, understood as hypostases, with the twelve Shi'ite Imams, arises from a theophanic vision with a cosmological dimension.

According to Corbin, it is necessary to distinguish the "doctrine of the imagination" from all creation *ex nihilo* and also from the Neoplatonic idea of emanation. "Rather it is necessary to think of a process of rising illumination, opening gradually onto the lumines-

cent state of possibilities eternally latent in the original divine Being."<sup>46</sup>

Corbin explains the intermediary and mediating nature and function of the imagination by the phenomenon of symbolization. In the imaginative field, everything is revealed as intermediary between the visible and the invisible, the perceptible and the suprasensory. On this point, the philosopher often links up with Sohrawardi, Jili, and Ibn 'Arabi in giving us the example of the phenomenon of mirrors: "[I]mages seen in mirrors are neither objects nor abstract ideas. All this is intermediary reality. And because it is intermediary, it all culminates in the notion of a symbol because the intermediary 'symbolizes with' the worlds that it mediates."<sup>47</sup> From the fact that he defines the "field of the imagination" as a contemplative visual field, Corbin comes to associate, in the subtle manner of visionary mystics, the imagining and the imagined; sight and what is seen; the contemplator and contemplated; the image, the face, and the mirror. Association is itself the object of the "science of the imagination." "The science of the imagination is also the science of mirrors, of all reflecting 'surfaces' and of the forms that appear in them. Like the science of *speculum*, it takes its place in *speculative* theosophy. . . . So does mystical geography, knowledge of this Earth . . . where everything seen in this world exists in a subtle state of 'immaterial matter.' . . . From that, it is the science of paradisaal contemplation. . . ."<sup>48</sup>

Corbin's notion of the "creative imagination" bears essentially on the "disjunctive" or autonomous imagination, to which the forms and shapes of the imaginal interworld correspond. And it is on this notion that the "science of the imagination" rests above all. Along these lines, and with a view toward clarification, Corbin introduces two technical terms belonging to the literature of Sufi contemplation: that of the "heart" (*qalb*), and that of "spiritual will" (*himma*). The "heart" is considered to be "the organ through which true knowledge, comprehensive intuition and the gnosis (*ma'rifa*) of God and the divine mysteries are produced." And it is "the organ of a perception that is, as such, experience and intimate taste (*dhawq*)."<sup>49</sup> To elucidate the transfigurative function of the "heart," Corbin draws on the notion of "subtle physiology," of which the spiritual "leaf" is one of the subtle centers.<sup>50</sup> It confers on the heart a "theandric" function, since its supreme vision will be that of the form of God (*surat al-Haqq*) and that is because the heart of the gnostic is the "eye," the organ through which God knows Himself, is revealed to Himself in the shape of his epiphanies.<sup>51</sup>

Corbin passes from the function of the "heart" to its will, to its "creative power" (*himma*). In this "power," it distinguishes, thanks to Ibn 'Arabi, a double aspect or double function: the revelation of "parapsychological" phenomena, and mystic perception or "intimate taste," that is, an "unveiling," an "epiphany to the heart." These two aspects make up "the creativity of the gnostic." On this point, Corbin's affirmation links up with the declaration of Ibn 'Arabi: "Through their representational faculty (*wahm*), all men create, in their active imagination, things that only exist within this faculty. Such is the general case. On the other hand, by his *himma*, the gnostic creates something that exists outside the seat of this faculty."<sup>52</sup>

Setting out from these subtle constituent elements of the "science of the imagination," Corbin concludes:

To have the science of the heart is to perceive the divine metamorphoses, that is to say the multitude and transmutation of forms in which the divine self epiphanizes, whether this be a figure in the external world or a religious belief. It is thus to know the divine Being through intuitive vision [*shohud*], it is to perceive it in the form where each of its epiphanies [*tajalli*] manifests itself [*mazhar*], thanks to the state of concentration where the mystic becomes like a "Q'uran," that is to say the Perfect Man as the microcosm of God, thanks to his *himmat*.<sup>53</sup>

Thus the science of the imagination leads Corbin to the "science of the heart," the central concept of which is that of *himma*. In essence, the role of this science is a new creation, a "recurrent creation," according to the Corbinian expression. By virtue of this "recurrence" or renewing of creation, "a same essence of the world of Mystery can be made manifest in one place, occulted in this first place and made manifest in another place; whereas the "identity consists of the *heccéité* of this essence, not only in its recurrent manifestations."<sup>54</sup> This implies that the idea of a recurrent Creation is not a repetition of the identical, but that of the same: "[I]t is as though it was it."<sup>55</sup> In following Ibn 'Arabi, Corbin reaffirms: "[W]hen the Divine Being manifests itself in this existence whose being consists of the theophanic imagination, it only appears in conformity with the essence of this imagination, not with what it is in itself, in its itness."<sup>56</sup>

The "science of the imagination" cannot be separated from the hermeneutics of symbols, from the interpretation of the hidden meaning. Corbin insists on this throughout his work. Perception of the intermediary world, thanks to *himmat*, reveals "imaginary pres-



ences" (*Hadarat al-Khayal*) to the imagining subject, that is, the hierarchized "worlds" or plans of epiphanic-imaginative forms, like that of the angel and so on, the understanding of which requires symbolic exegesis. According to Corbin, symbolic exegesis is a creative exegesis in the sense that it transmutes things into symbols, making them exist on another level of being, at a higher level than that of the deceptive phenomenal, and thus close to their substantial reality. Thus, contrary to interpretations arising from symbolic reductionism, which consists of reducing the significance of perceived phenomena to a lower level (the allegorical, for example), the hermeneutics of the hidden meaning (*ta'wil*) consists of "reconducting and raising up to a higher level."<sup>57</sup> Symbolic interpretation has to follow the same guidelines:

It is necessary to turn the perceivable forms back into imaginative forms in order to pass on to higher meanings. To go in the opposite direction (to turn imaginative forms into perceivable forms from which they originated) is to annihilate the potential of the imagination (that, for example, will still purely and simply identify the mystical temple of which only one column in semivisible, with some determined material temple, whereas the identification of the visible temple with the mystical temple signifies a lifting up, a "dematerialization").<sup>58</sup>

## II. Confrontation

### 1. *The Imaginal and the Imaginary*

The imaginal conceived as interworld and as imaginative power reveals itself to the theosophical intuition as a real fact. Consequently, it can be distinguished from the imaginary, that is, from the fictitious in the philosophical and psychological sense in which the term is used today. As the "imaginative faculty," it is the source of novel images, of symbolic figures like that of the angel, which incarnate the dark and light areas of the human soul. And as a visionary space, it is a privileged field of the speculative voyage of theosophy as well as that of the spiritual chivalry of the mystic. Thanks to a voyage and chivalry, the itinerant arrives at the summit of gnostic knowledge (*erfan*). Through its two imaginary and spatializing functions, the imaginal affirms itself as a power that is both creative and cognitive, thanks to which self-knowledge, the recognition of the other – the authentic shape of the self – and existential integrity are strengthened and accomplished.

In order to affirm the reality of the imaginal, Corbin insists on its

cognitive role. He perceives it as *imaginatio vera* and opposes it to the *imaginari* (imaginary). He also arrives in this way at a denunciation of all misinterpretation, arising from false analogies, that reduces the imaginative-imaginatory power to the imaginary, the fictitious, or the estimative.

To oppose the real to the imaginary or to utopia is the same poverty as to confuse symbol with allegory, the exegesis of the spiritual meaning with an allegorical interpretation.<sup>59</sup>

In the same way, Corbin deduces that the man who has recourse to the imaginary has himself lost his bearings, wandering in an unreal world that he had formerly unrealized.

The confusion assumes the degradation of the imaginative power itself, of its object and its poetic functions. If one identifies this power with "fantasy," it is fatal that the world conjured up by it should be a utopia and that the man who trusts this organ should be a utopian. Not having his imaginative power regulated by a cognitive function rigorously centered between two others, such a man is virtually unbalanced, paranoid, hallucinated, schizophrenic, and so on.<sup>60</sup>

According to Corbin, it is necessary, in order to discern the poetic value of the creative imagination, to recognize this last as "something other" than an organ of the imaginary and the unreal.

But this recognition itself presupposes a metaphysics of being that secures its place at an intermediary level of being between the world of pure intellect and the world of the senses, and that *eo ipso* determines the axis of the function of the cognitive power of which this intermediary world is the proper object.<sup>61</sup>

Corbin again affirms that "to confuse the imaginary and the imaginal is to make oneself incapable of understanding figures and events that are neither *myth* nor *history*. And this *failure to understand* is, without doubt, the most serious index of the lost continent."<sup>62</sup> But this "lost continent," or unseen imaginal, is both far away and very near, according to whether one is disposed to perceive it or not. It relates to a world that is "concealed in the very act of sense perception and that we have to rediscover in the apparent objective certainty of the latter."<sup>63</sup>

## 2. The Imaginal and the Platonic Intelligible

At two specific levels, the interworld can be distinguished from the Platonic world of ideas-archetypes, from the intelligible. The first

distinct level relates to the ontological situation of this world; the second to the specific nature and function of the images to be found in it.

As far as the ontological specificity of the interworld is concerned, it is situated below Plato's intelligible world and it is superior to the world of the senses. Thus, as we have already seen, the imaginal is an intermediary world situated between the perceptible and the suprasensory, and partakes of these two adjacent worlds. It follows from this that its essential function is to spiritualize (or transfigure) the perceptible, and to give flesh to the suprasensory. In this way, the interworld escapes from the clear-cut dualism of the Platonic system, which polarizes the universe of being and knowing between an inconsistent, even unrealized, perceptible and an intelligible suprasensible, understood as the extreme limit of everything that can *really* exist, in a state of pure substance.

Moreover, in conformity with the hierarchy of worlds of our theosophers, Shaykh al-Ishraq Sohrawardi conceived of a world of primordial entities of light, the "world of mothers" (*al-Ommahat*), beyond the intelligible world. This was the world of the "sovereign lights" (*Anwar qahira*) of the "archangelic lights" (*Amahraspands*, Zoroastrian archangels). Sohrawardi discovered the existence of this world thanks to his knowledge of Mazdean cosmology, the universe of the "Lights of Glory" (*xvarnah*), of the celestial doubles of earthly beings. In this "world of mothers," each being finds its luminescent source, its original vital fire, its "personal angel."<sup>64</sup>

Each of the "archangelic lights" (or archangels) has its celestial double, its *Fravashi*. These "lights" are also part of a hierarchy, divided into two groups, according to whether, from the ontological point of view, they constitute a vertical or "longitudinal order" (*silsila tuliya*), or a horizontal or "latitudinal order" (*silsila ardiya*). The reference of these entities to their double and their hierarchy assumes the idea of "archetypes of archetypes."<sup>65</sup> The plurality of suprasensory worlds, of which the interworld is a part, and of their polyvalent function, cannot be superimposed on the Platonic vision of the intelligible.

As for images of the interworld, they are often conceived differently from Platonic ideas. In Sohrawardi, for example, they are interpreted in terms of angelology. They become angels or lords of species existing in this world and they are not integrated by a rationalist conception or a clear-cut dualism, as in Plato, but rather by a unifying theophanic vision.

Each of them [angels] is the angel or lord of space [*rabb al-nu'*], of the image or icon [*sanam*], of theurgy [*tilisme*], that constitute the corporeal species of which he is the angel because of its theurgic action. The notion of archetype is no longer exactly that proposed by classic Platonism. On the other hand, it guides all the piety and spiritual life of the *Ishraqiyun*. The angelological interpretation of Platonic ideas, the *ta'wil* of the theory of ideas is, in brief, what Sohrawardi considered most precious about the theosophy of ancient Persia and all its decisions – in physics, psychology, cosmology and metaphysics – were taken with a view to preserving it.<sup>66</sup>

Other Persian theosophers considered archetypal ideas like “images in suspense” (*mothol mo'allafa*). Because the interworld has the properties of a mirror, autonomous and nonmaterial images exist in it like the images in a mirror.<sup>67</sup> In the image of the world to which they belong, the “suspended images” have, in addition to their ambivalent function of an initiatory kind, an ontological function. They translate into, among other things, opposite frames of mind and thus represent antagonistic figures that confront one another within man. The “Purple Archangel” and the “Archangel Gabriel” of Sohrawardi belong to the group of images of the interworld that exposes itself to the visionary perception of the mystic. The “Purple Archangel” is reminiscent of the purple color of morning and evening twilight, the mixture of day and night, of light and shade, of the conscious and the unconscious. The “Archangel Gabriel” corresponds to the same psychospiritual symbolism. The angel has two wings – the right wing is pure light, the left wing is tinged with a reddish burnishing, a dark color. Thus the archangel awakens the mystical visionary to existential dualness, to the antagonistic double aspect of his inner self before it undergoes any inner refinement.<sup>68</sup>

The symbolic images of the imaginal interworld thus enjoy a cognitive function of an initiatory or psychological kind. In this sense, they are far from being immutable entities of pure light as they are in Plato.

Finally, it is necessary to make clear that reference to Platonic ideas is far from rare among Iranian theosophers. In such cases, there is reference to “Platonic archetypes of light” (*mothol aflatuniya nuraniya*), as Corbin pertinently remarks,<sup>69</sup> a terminology that allows one to distinguish between Platonic ideas and imaginal images. Even when it is a question of Platonic “archetypes,” they are often interpreted by theosophers like Mir Damad (seventeenth

century) in terms of prophetology and of prophetic mission – “natures with a mission” (*taba’i morsala*), “substances with a mission, sent” (*Jawahir morsala*).<sup>70</sup> In this way, among this group of theosophers, Platonic philosophy evolves and is incorporated in a prophetological conception.

### III. Corbin’s Imaginal Between East and West – From “Persian Platonists” to “Cambridge Platonists”

Although, in the West, from Aristotle to Sartre, the imagination, thought of as “the lunatic of the home,” has been subject to severe philosophical condemnations, Corbin picks out its intermittent reappearances in the course of Western hierohistory. This even allows certain links to be made between the so-called “Persian Platonists” (the Persian interpreters of Platonism) and the “Cambridge Platonists.” These comparisons, which constitute one of the main themes of his work, have a triple goal: first, to indicate a resemblance between the institutions and imaginative visions of these theosophers; second, to develop analogies between some of their basic ideas; and third, to affirm between both of them an affinity with the world of Platonic ideas or with Neoplatonism.

The Norman philosopher Nicole d’Oresme (1325–1382) is one of the “Cambridge Platonists,” about whom Corbin wrote most frequently. Master of Navarre College and Bishop of Lisieux, disciple of Albert of Saxony, he was one of the last great scholastics of the fourteenth century and one of the first to have known how to adapt the French language to philosophical and scientific expressions. Under the influence of the innovative school of Oxford, his work is decisively original thanks to the “theory of the latitude of forms.” Compared to Aristotelian physics, he elaborated a new analysis of movement. The concept of “latitude,” which fourteenth-century scientists used to describe the intensive dimensions and speed of a movement, came to signify the elementary variation of speed for Oresme. Thanks to these new geometrical constructs, Oresme came to recognize “the law according to which the distance traveled by a moving object that is subject to a uniformly varied movement, increases over time.”<sup>71</sup> This scientific discovery is generally ascribed to Galileo.<sup>72</sup>

Corbin’s attention was attracted to Oresme by the fact that this “precursor of analytical geometry” conferred a double corporeity on the body. Corbin talked of Oresme’s “intuition of genius”

because "as a result, the integral notion of corporeity, from the fact that it assumed a fourth dimension, attained in the *mundus imaginalis* that [which] it postulated at the same time as it testified to it."<sup>73</sup>

Along the same lines, Corbin took from Oresme the idea of "graphic representation of qualitative variations," geometric forms that are, according to him, attained in a spatial configuration of a qualitative kind."<sup>74</sup> "What Nicholas of Oresme wanted to make possible was a spatial intuition, an imaginative contemplation, thanks to geometric shapes [which are the equivalents] of qualitative phenomena that, of their nature, elude dimensional representation."<sup>75</sup> Corbin concludes: "As such, these figures themselves harbor a qualitative element. They amount to something quite different from the type of quantitative science which is modern physics. It thus appears to be going too far to turn [Oresme] into the father of analytical geometry as Pierre Duhem wishes to do."<sup>76</sup> Thus, Corbin attempts to integrate Oresme's wish into an essentially imaginative, even transcendental, perspective. He compares Oresme's "discoveries" to the contributions of the "diagrammatic art" of the Iranian theosophist Haydar Amoli, a contemporary of Oresme, who based his ideas on the "laws" of a philosophical and imaginative algebra.<sup>77</sup> In addition, he considers that Oresme's *latitudo formarum* "assumes a field of variation within the limits of which variations of intensity and softening or remission of qualitative forms take place."<sup>78</sup> He claims to have found, in Molla Sadra's motif of the "intensifications and degradations of being" (an existential mobility that carries along all that exists in an infinite movement of ascent and descent), an equivalent of the idea of the "intensification of forms" and of the "extension" of their movement, but with the difference that Oresme represents *geometrically* the space traveled by a moving body in a varied movement: its extension is represented by a line of longitude, its intensity by the latitude of its figures. Thus, in Molla Sadra, "the idea of the intensifications of being brings about that of the forms of being, that is to say, of essences. . . . It starts, from itself, a phenomenology of the act of existing."<sup>79</sup>

The name of Henry More also appears in Corbin's writing. More designated the *mundus imaginalis* as *quarta dimensio*. "It is certainly this same subtle imaginal world which postulates and explores the metaphysics of the imagination transmuted into pure spiritual faculty in Molla Sadra Shirazi. Even here, Molla Sadra satisfies the

same postulate of a corporeity which is not attainable in the three-dimensional empirical world."<sup>80</sup>

Corbin also hypothesizes a correspondence between the "spiritual matter" (*maddat ruhaniya*) of Molla Sadra and the *spissitudo spiritualis* of Henry More.<sup>81</sup> This notion of "spiritual consistency" designates a "fourth dimension," which corresponds to the subtle dimension of the imaginal world.<sup>82</sup> Finally, when Corbin refers, in Molla Sadra, to the idea of "gradual sublimations of subtle matter" realized in the course of metamorphoses of the subtle body, he compares this Sadrian idea with that which is contained in the *spissitudo spiritualis* of More, "a conception that has the virtue of resolving the dualism between thought and extent, with which so many of our [W]estern philosophers have struggled."<sup>83</sup>

Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), the "Cambridge Platonist" most frequently quoted by Corbin, was one of the great Lutheran figures in Western mysticism and one of the precursors of German romanticism. He explained the ontogenesis of being by a new metaphysic that insists on the founding dialectic of "will" and "liberty." According to Boehme, the conflict of opposites, which dialectically and positively opposes love and hate, light and shade, necessarily gives birth to new forms of existence and knowledge. Boehme's cosmology escapes from medieval dualism in considering nature, among creatures, as the foundation of self-being. From this point of view, all the elements of nature are spiritualized and all spiritual forces are given flesh, according to a renewable hierarchical order that goes from above to below and from below to above. In his *Mysterium Magnum*, Boehme places psychospiritual phenomena within seven "forms" or degrees: violence and desire; bitter and thorny; anguish and sensitivity; fire, spirit, understanding, and desire; light and love; spoken word, sound, and language; and being and receptacle.<sup>84</sup> Boehme sees these phenomena as a unifying vision: "All seven [forms] only represent one single thing . . . all together, they are only the revelation of God through love and anger, eternity and time."<sup>85</sup>

In Boehme, the active imagination is deployed as a theophanic and theophanizing power: Setting out from the divine or "celestial essence," suprasensory forces transform themselves into a "taking of shape, into an exterior degree"; they become "being or corporeality."<sup>86</sup> The "being of corporeality" corresponds to the "seventh from of external nature," which is "the external realm of the heavens where the form of God takes on a being which is colored by the

brightness and force of fire and light.”<sup>87</sup> For Boehme, the corporalization of the forces of nature, exactly like the “copenetration of spirits and beings,” arises from “amorous desire.”<sup>88</sup> Seven “forms” or “spirits” constitute the cycle of “eternal nature,” which begins with the initial shape of *materia prima*, the archetype of opaque matter, and moves on, in the temporal sense, toward the seventh degree, *ultima materia* compared to new spiritual forms to come. In Boehme’s vision, the universe of shadows, including the human microcosm, is spread out equally in the image of the spiritual cosmos.<sup>89</sup>

The theosophical teaching of Boehme is also distinguished by an imaginative representation of magic, which is considered as a founding “essence.” This representation links essence to desire, will to imagination as its own representation.

Magic is the mother of eternity, of the essence of all things because it makes itself and is understood in desire. In itself, it is nothing but a will. This same will is the great mystery of all the marvels and secrets, and is borne, in substance, by the imagination of desiring hunger. . . . Magic is spirit and the body is its body and, yet, the two are one. . . . It is the formation in divine wisdom. . . .<sup>90</sup>

Profound contemplation of Boehme’s *Mysterium Magnum* leads to the assertion that the metamorphosis of the inner man culminates with the presence of the divine alter ego in the profound heart.

In the old type of man, a new spiritual man is born with the thoughts and will of God . . . until the tree attains its fruits of the *Mysterium Magnum*, of divine science. Then the external shell will fall and the spiritual tree of life will be seen standing up erect in the field of God.<sup>91</sup>

There is thus a patent similarity between certain fundamental aspects of Boehme’s theosophy and Iranian theosophy. The theophanic base of the active imagination, the manifestation of psychospiritual phenomena in the form of subtle bodies, the perception of love as a transforming force, and the mystical idea of the metamorphoses of the inner man are, among other things, some of the aspects of Boehme’s mysticism that imply such similarity.

In Corbin’s eyes, Boehme’s work is related directly to that of Ibn ‘Arabi and Novalis, both of whom turn the active imagination into a theophanic imagination, in which a “sophianic vision” takes shape that is capable of perceiving the angel, the celestial double of the soul.<sup>92</sup> The “hermeneutics of the hidden meaning” (*ta’wil*) of



Shi'ite Islam evokes, for Corbin, the "prophetic exegesis" arising from the "clairvoyance" of Boehme.<sup>93</sup> Boehme's idea of *Aurora Consurgens* is reminiscent of the Sohrawardian notion of "oriental being" (*ishraqi*) and "oriental knowledge" (*'ilm ishraqi*),<sup>94</sup> in the same way as that of a *materia prima* evokes the "agent intelligence" (*'Aql fa'al*) of Avicenna, which is also considered as an angelic figure of the "celestial soul."<sup>95</sup> Following Corbin, it is also the same *materia prima* that Semnani (thirteenth to fourteenth century) presents in the form of seven "centers" or "subtle bodies" (*latifa*), from which his mystical anthropology is composed.<sup>96</sup>

At the mystical cosmological level, Corbin notices that there is a fundamental similarity between the spiritualized universe of Boehme and *caro spiritualis*, the celestial Earth of *hurqalya* of our contemplative mystics.<sup>97</sup> Boehme's theogony refers to Molla Sadra's metaphysics of being based on the idea of a "metaphysical matter" or "subtle matter" (*latifa qabiliya*), which generally is thought of among Iranian theosophists as the receptive and passive principle of epiphanic forms. This "immaterial matter" is thought of as the very foundation of the imaginal world, of the "separate imagination."<sup>98</sup> Therefore, the hierarchy and plurality of "worlds" constitute a common perspective shared by Boehme and the Sufi theosophists.<sup>99</sup>

Boehme's *Imago Magia* is one of the main themes of Corbin's work, which allows him to establish a connection between Boehme and Sohrawardi. We have seen already how, in the latter, the "Story of the Exile," like that of the archangel, was none other than the story of the soul of the gnostic. In fact, the phenomenon of forgetting (of the exile), represented in the form of the solitary and disoriented "I," and the phenomenon of awakening (of the saving conscience, represented by the angel) make up the two extremes of the story of the soul and of its journey in the interworld. It is with this in mind that Corbin evokes the *Imago Magia* of the German theosophist, detects in it an *art memorativa* that "finally is a matter for the *art hieratica*," and situates it in a cosmological perspective. "Since the microcosm is the reflection of the macrocosm, memory becomes that of the theurgic sage, the divine man, in close association with the divine powers and energies of the cosmos. . . . Moreover, we have learned that, for Sohrawardi, each species is the theurgy (talisman) of its angel."<sup>100</sup> For Corbin, a magical awakening of this kind is linked to the power of imaginative forms arising from the creative imagination. "The very contents of memory

are the inner spiritual forms of which it is the treasure. It is the treasure of the imagination."<sup>101</sup>

Finally, Corbin admires Schelling (1775–1854) for his "historiosophy." He situates him at the same level as the "Cambridge Platonists," and evokes his name along with that of Boehme, Fichte, Franz von Baader, Soloviev, and so on.

Schelling was, in fact, a passionate reader of Boehme, whose theosophy he characterized as "eminently speculative mysticism" and as a "doctrine" that contained a powerful antithesis to the rationalism that, since Plato, "had never really triumphed in any age, even up to the present moment."<sup>102</sup>

Schelling himself proposed a "legend of the ages," in which certain of Boehme's themes are echoed. He relates the coming of the absolute and accedes to the order of the narrative. Thus, the narrative encompasses a historiosophy, the history of creation and of "savages" or mythological religion up to the moment when, in Christian revelation, its actions appear in their true, divine shapes. From this point of view, Schelling breaks with the philosophical ideas arising from Platonism and considers the absolute as the beginning of the beginning, at the dawn of our age.<sup>103</sup>

Schelling confers on time the same infinity as space. In this way, he arrives at the idea of timelessness: "[T]he eternity of things can only be reflected in time as the negation of time . . . true eternity is not eternity by opposition to time, but eternity including time itself and laying it down in itself as eternity. . . ." <sup>104</sup> From this standpoint, death is only the fulfillment of the present in the propheticized future, in the realm of eternity.

As for the imagination, for Schelling, it occupies an intermediary position between the faculty of knowing and that of realizing. It "comes on the scene when knowing comes to an end and realizing has not yet begun."<sup>105</sup> In order to show the absolute as realized, the imagination represents it as already realized. By those means, it gives rise to a consequential mysticism that perceives the absolute as realizable.<sup>106</sup> In Schelling, the imagination is thus a spiritual, realizing, and creative faculty.

Corbin's references to the idea of "historiosophy" attest to the fact that he was a reader of Schelling. The points at which he evokes the name of the German philosopher are the main moments of the encounter between "Persian Platonists" and "Cambridge Platonists." When Corbin presents – in, for example, the perspective of a "comparative phenomenology" – man in history and his-

tory in man, he rises up against "agnostic history" and supports the "Schellingian" idea of sacred history. "One can no longer pursue any kind of philosophy of agnostic history, only that which theosophists like Franz von Baader or Schelling have rightly called 'historiosophy.'" Corbin also observes in Schelling the absence of the dogma of the incarnation, of the manifestation of the divine in flesh, which "implies an effacement [*Kenosis*] of the divine in the flesh."<sup>107</sup> But he notices in Schelling, as in Oetinger, the existence of a "corporeal spirituality," which is translated by the concept of *Geistlichkeit*. Corbin establishes a parallel between this form of "corporeal spirituality" and the "subtle bodies" (*latifa*) that prefigure the visionary perception of mystics like Semnani.<sup>108</sup>

#### IV. Conclusions

One of the conclusions we can draw from our "archaeology" of the Corbinian imaginal is the necessity for a *distinction* between the imaginal – or creative imagination – and the imaginary. This distinction, neglected since the time of Aristotle but revived by the "Persian Platonists" as well as by the "Cambridge Platonists," must take place on two precise levels – the ontological and the hermeneutic. Ontologically, the imaginary can be defined as the fictitious, the unreal, the nonexistent. Its first function is to reproduce the image – or the "copy" – of the already seen, as Aristotle<sup>109</sup> – and, nowadays, the pioneers of modern psychology<sup>110</sup> – maintain, as well as to produce chimerical images, these "illusions and phantoms animated by the passions."<sup>111</sup> In this sense, the imaginary, often wrongly described by the word "imagination," becomes the very unreality of fantasy, the "lunatic of the home," an "enemy of reason,"<sup>112</sup> of "intellectualizing," or of "rational knowledge."<sup>113</sup> Finally, the imaginary acts at the levels of the legendary, novelistic, poetical, and other registers to confer a new dimension on the unidimensional real, on everyday space and time. In this last case, taking on the appearance of a dream, the imaginary offers to the imagining subject the possibility of a (fictitious) fulfillment of a frustrated desire. In this way, it acts as "a source of joy and consolation according to Freudian terminology."<sup>114</sup> Through its double function of enriching the real and compensating for repressed desires, the imaginary, like dreams, carries the subject into a "surrealist" world, close to the universe of fantasies, a world detached from lived reality but which "tends to

become real,"<sup>115</sup> exactly like the underlying images that "on their own initiative, tend to impose themselves on us and present themselves to us as real."<sup>116</sup> In all these cases, where the imagination and the imaginary are fused together – whether the latter be seen as a phantom or illusion, or interpreted in terms of dreaming – one is very close to the Sartrean conception of the image and the imaginary. This conception does not recognize, outside the real and the unreal, the existence of an imagination that has its own cognitive-creative powers and, as a consequence, it takes the imagination for the imaginary and any image for the faint "shadow" of its objects. "The object in an image is unreal," says Sartre. "To act on these unreal objects, it is necessary that I split myself in two, that *I make myself unreal*. . . They are pure passivity."<sup>117</sup>

In opposition to the inconsistent imaginary is the creative imagination, the imaginal. It extends human existence and knowledge not in a world of phantoms, or even an unreal and unrealizing world, but in a world where inner transmutations materialize, giving birth to new modes of being and knowing. It is in this subtle topography where, according to Corbin, "the events of the soul take place and have their 'place,'" events that are realities of psychospiritual order that escape the limited range of positive perception, but that come within the scope of imaginative perception. As far as self-knowledge is concerned, mystical imagination acts as the royal road of an "autoanalysis," from which superior knowledge, gnosis (*erfan*), emerges. Far from being a pure speculative-imaginary fact, the latter is a "knowledge-of-the-present," an illuminatory "present knowledge." It is the fruit of the rebirth or rediscovery, in itself, of the "Orient of lights" and the intensification of its creative luminescence. It has for support not a partial "objective awareness," inseparable from positive perception, but a "supra awareness," inherent in imaginative perception of cosmological range. Arising from a spiritual experience of a psychocosmological order, "oriental knowledge," exactly like the theophanic imagination that underlies it, takes on a cosmological dimension. Gnostic knowledge, culminating in the fulfillment of the Quest for the Orient, thus rests on the triple form of the imagination: *topic, cognitive, and creative*.

In contrast, the imaginal, as it appears in the visionary narratives, is both the domain and means of a "spiritual chivalry," of an initiatory combat from the subconscious depths of the "I" to the heights of the fulfilled self, of the hyperaware substantial "me."

Instead of causing the imagining subject to fall back to a lower level of its existence and its history (for example, in the psychic space-time of symptomatic fixations, to tragedies of the past or to consolatory reveries), the creative imagination transcends the situation of the subject as well as his experiences undergone in time and space, in a vertical direction to its existence in the here and now. Thus, in the imaginal, transfiguration, which gives way to a second existence, wins out over the repetition of the same and over the return to the unchangeable. In this sense, the imaginal shows itself to be like the *materia prima* of gnostic knowledge, the *mundus imaginalis* of initiatory combat, and the organ by which psychospiritual events are perceived. The notion of the imaginal cannot be superimposed on that of the imaginary or the fictional. From this point of view, the hermeneutics of the spiritual sense (*ta'wil*) inherent in the theophanic imagination cannot be reduced to a symbolic interpretation, the sole object of which is the immanent world of the imaginary.

## Notes

1. Henry Corbin, "Mundus imaginalis ou l'imaginaire et l'Imaginal," *Cahiers internationaux de Symbolisme* 6 (June 1964).
2. Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Vol. 4, (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) p. 335f.
3. Corbin, "Mundus imaginalis."
4. Ibid.
5. Corbin, "Pour une charte de l'Imaginal," *Corps spirituel et Terre céleste: De l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shi'ite*, 2d ed. (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1979) p.14.
6. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, p. 202f.
7. Cf. Mahmūd Shabestārī, *Golshan-e Râz (The Rose Garden of Mystery)* (Lahore, 1978) pp. 39-40 [Persian text with English translation.]
8. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, p. 178f., and vol. 4, p. 89f.
9. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 2d ed., (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) p. 285.
10. Cf. Shihâboddîn Yahyâ Sohrawardî, "Hikmat al-Isrâq," *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, Persian text introduced, annotated and published by H. Corbin, 2 vols. (Istanbul, 1945) [rev. ed. (Teheran-Paris: Maisonneuve, 1952)].
11. Shihâboddîn Yahyâ Sohrawardî, "Livre des Entretiens," *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, p. 109.
12. Cf. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4, op. cit., p. 106.
13. Ibid., p. 109.

## Henri Corbin and the Imaginal

14. Corbin, *La Philosophie iranienne islamique aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1981) p. 81.
15. Mohsen Fayz Kâshânî, *Kalimât maknûna*, ("Words Kept Secret"), chapter 31 (Teheran, 1938) p. 69. [Passage cited in H. Corbin, *Corps spirituel*, p. 207.]
16. Corbin, *Corps spirituel*, p. 10.
17. Corbin, *L'homme et son ange* (Paris: Fayard, 1983) p. 250.
18. Cf. H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4, p. 378.
19. Ibid., p. 379.
20. Cf. Ibid.
21. Cf. H. Corbin, "Le motif du voyage et du messager," *L'Iran et la philosophie*, (Paris: Fayard, 1990) p. 181.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 183.
24. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4, p. 379.
25. "Vendida," "Fargard," *Avesta*, vol. 2, 2d ed., 3 vols., trans. commentary James Darmesteter (Édition Princeps, 1892/3) [rev. ed. (A. Maisonneuve, 1960), pp. 7–11.
26. "Fargard," *Avesta*, vol. 2, pp. 39–40.
27. Ibid., *Yasna*, vol. 57, 21–22.
28. Corbin, *Corps spirituel et Terre céleste*, p. 42.
29. Cf. Ibid.
30. Corbin, *L'homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien*, (Paris, 1974), p. 15.
31. Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste*, op. cit., p. 51.
32. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2, p. 66.
33. Ibid., p. 61.
34. Avicenna, "Le récit de Hayy, Ibn Yaqzân," cited and trans. in H. Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire*, (Oxford: Berg, 1979) p. 154.
35. Ibid., p. 157.
36. Sohrawardî, "Le récit de l'Exil occidental," *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, cited and trans. in H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2, p. 292.
37. Sohrawardî, "Le récit de l'archange empourpré," op. cit., p. 228.
38. Ibid., p. 76.
39. Sohrawardî, "Kitâb al-Talwîhât," *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, op. cit., p. 484.
40. Cf. Corbin, *La philosophie iranienne islamique*, p. 201.
41. Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabî* (Paris: Flammarion, 1958) p. 160.
42. Ibid., p. 135–136.
43. Ibid., pp. 139.
44. Cf. Mollâ 'Abdorrahîm Damâwandî, *Commentaire des plus beaux Noms divins*, cited in H. Corbin, *La philosophie iranienne islamique aux*, pp. 372–375.
45. Ibid., p. 368. Cf. also H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, p. 278.
46. Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, p. 161.

47. Ibid., p. 162. Cf. also H. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 2d ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) p. 90f. Cf. also Idem, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, p. 150f., vol. 2, pp. 326–28; vol. 4, p. 108.
48. Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, pp. 162–63.
49. Ibid., pp. 164–65.
50. Ibid., p. 165. Cf. also H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, pp. 17f. and 272f.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., p. 166.
53. Ibid., pp. 171–72.
54. Ibid., p. 177.
55. Koran 27:42, cited in *ibid.*, p. 178.
56. Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, p. 182.
57. Ibid., p. 179.
58. Ibid.
59. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4, p. 386.
60. Ibid., p. 378.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., p. 388.
63. Ibid.
64. Sohrawardî, *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, vol. 1, op. cit., p.171. Cf. also *ibid.*, H. Corbin, *Prolégomène II*, p. 39. Cf. also Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2, p. 119.
65. Cf. H. Corbin, *Prolégomène II in Sohrawardî, Oeuvres...*, op. cit., p. 47. Cf. also Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2, p. 125.
66. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 230–231.
67. Cf. Sohrawardî, *Oeuvres...*, vol. 1, p. 254.
68. Cf. Sohrawardî, "Le récit de l'archange empourpré," *Oeuvres...*, vol. 2, op. cit. p. 207. Also Idem, "Le récit du bruissement des ailes de Gabriel," in *ibid.*, p. 225.
69. Corbin, *La philosophie iranienne islamique*, p. 196.
70. Cf. *ibid.*
71. Pierre Duhem, *Le système du monde: Histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic*, vol. 7 (Paris: Hermann, 1956) p. 550.
72. Cf. Anastasios Brener, *Duhem: Science, réalité et apparence* (Paris: Vrin, 1990) p. 170f.
73. Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée* (Teheran/Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1977) p. 42.
74. Ibid., p. 39.
75. Ibid., p. 40.
76. Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne islamique*, pp. 234–35.
77. Ibid., p. 201.
78. Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée*, p. 39.
79. Ibid., p. 42.
80. Ibid.

## Henri Corbin and the Imaginal

81. Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne islamique*, pp. 36 and 79.
82. Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste*, p. 194.
83. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4, op. cit., p. 158.
84. Jacob Böhme, *Mysterium Magnum*, trans N. Berdiaeff, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1945) pp. 87–90.
85. Ibid., pp. 89–90.
86. Ibid., p. 84.
87. Ibid., p. 86.
88. Ibid., pp. 80–81.
89. Cf. Jacob Böhme, *De la base sublime et profonde des six points théophaniques*, trans. Louis-Claude Saint-Martin, in Gerhard Wehr et al., *Jacob Böhme* (Paris: Alban Michel, 1977) pp. 165–66.
90. Böhme, *Mysterium magnum*, vol. 1, pp. 183–84.
91. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 510–11. Cf. also *De la triple vie de l'homme*, trans. L. Cl. de Saint-Martin (Paris: Magneret, 1809) (rev. ed. [Paris: Éditions d'Aujourd'hui, 1982]).
92. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2, pp. 268 and 307.
93. Cf. ibid., vol. 1, pp. 167–68.
94. Cf. ibid., vol. 2, p. 50.
95. Cf. ibid., vol 3, p. 329. Cf. idem, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire* (Oxford: Berg, 1979), pp. 79 and 126.
96. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, p. 328.
97. Corbin, *Corps spirituel et Terre céleste*, p. 24.
98. Corbin, *La Philosophie iranienne islamique* p. 77.
99. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, p. 24.
100. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2, p. 369.
101. Ibid., p. 368. Cf. also Corbin, *La philosophie iranienne islamique* p. 256.
102. F.W.J. von Schelling, *Philosophie de la Révélation (Philosophie de Offenbarung)*, trans. J. F. Marquet and J. F. Courtine, Book 1 (Paris: P. U. F., 1989) p. 143.
103. F.W.J. von Schelling, *Les âges du monde: Versions premières (1811–1813)*, trans. B. Vancamp (Brussels: O.U.S.I.A., 1988).
104. F.W.J. von Schelling, "De la philosophie de la nature," *Oeuvres métaphysiques*, trans., annot. J.F. Courtine and E. Martineau (Paris: Gallimard, 1980) p. 109.
105. F.W.J. von Schelling, *Premiers écrits (1794–1795), Neuvième lettre*, trans. J.F. Courtine (Paris: P.U.F., 1987) p. 204.
106. Cf. ibid., pp. 204–5.
107. Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée*, p. 44. Cf. idem, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4, pp. 446–47.
108. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, p. 224.
109. Cf. O. Hamelin, *Le Système d'Aristote*, 4th ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1985), pp. 283 and 382.
110. Cf. definitions of "image" and "imagination," H. Pieron, *Vocabulaire de la psychologie*, 6th ed. (Paris: P.U.F., 1979), pp. 220–21. Cf. also A.



- Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, 12th ed. (Paris: P.U.F., 1975), pp. 342, 464, 467.
111. Malebranche, *Entretiens sur la Métaphysique et sur la Religion* (1688), ed. A. Cuvillier, vol. 1, 5th Entretien, sections 12–13 (Paris: Vrin, 1948), pp. 173–174.
112. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1670), ed. M. Autrand, section 2 (Paris: Bordas, 1966), p. 53.
113. René Descartes, *Méditation VI*, trans., presented F. Khodoss, 2d ed. (Paris: P.U.F., 1980), p.109f.
114. Sigmund Freud, *Le mot d'esprit et ses rapports avec l'inconscient*, trans. Marie Bonaparte and M. Nathan (Paris: Gallimard, 1930), pp. 208–9. Cf. idem, *Introduction à la psychanalyse*, trans. S. Jankélévitch (Paris: Payot, 1947 [rev. ed., 1979], p. 198f.
115. André Breton cited in Ferdinand Alquié, *Philosophie du surréalisme*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), p. 133.
116. Ibid., p. 134.
117. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) p. 240.